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Santísima Muerte: On the Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image

JOHN THOMPSON

The stripper at the Reyes y Reynas Dancing Bar, on República de Cuba in the center of Mexico City, approached and asked if I spoke Spanish. Yes, I do. Would I buy her a drink? Of course. As she ordered a glass of amaretto and leaned wearily on the table, my eye was drawn to the silver pendant wedged between her breasts. I recognized the shape of Santísima Muerte. I pointed: Who's that? It's Santísima Muerte. Tell me more, I said. Well, God and Santísima Muerte look after me, she said, fingering the pendant. I love La Muerte, because of her great fairness, and her great unpredictability. You know, Death can come at any time, and eventually does come to all, rich or poor. I nodded. We sat quietly for a few moments. A bottle broke nearby. She smiled, and held up the image on the silver chain. I would like to give this to you, she said. Would you accept it? Of course. She removed the pendant and chain, and clasped it carefully around my neck. There, she said. Promise me you'll take this with you to the United States and never throw it away. I promised. But, I asked, doesn't this leave you without protection? Oh no, she said. Look. She opened an amulet bag tied to her wrist and pulled out a small skull carved of bone. This is all I need, she said, and smiled.¹

This is the story of a Mexican occult image: Santísima Muerte, Holy Death, the robed, skeletal figure of Death herself. In recent years I have watched the devotion to Santísima Muerte grow in Mexico, and now I find her image more frequently in the United States. If she's moving into the neighborhood, it behooves us to make her acquaintance.

A note to the fearful: although a thoroughly evil figure to some, in current popular belief Santísima Muerte is a complex, multi-faceted spirit, possessing great power which can be used to achieve both good

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and evil ends. No longer the sole property of the sorcerer, she now occupies a place of honor in the Mexican popular pantheon. She avails herself to “good” Catholics and “bad” witches alike. Indeed, after pursuing Santísima Muerte through central Mexico and the borderlands for several years, I have reached my own level of appreciation and respect for this flexible folk deity, and for the ingenuity of the Mexican imagination that has invented and re-invented her.

Santísima Muerte apparently began life as a specialist in love magic. The printed prayer to her, the *Oración de la Santísima Muerte*, is a modern-day throwback to a specific form of medieval Spanish love magic: the spell to bring back a wandering lover. Now, however, Santísima Muerte has gone beyond love spells to become a shadowy patroness of all kinds of Mexican magic, the pale and implacable counterpart of that other great protector of the Mexican soul, the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In this paper, I begin by describing my encounters with Santísima Muerte in Tucson and along the U.S.-Mexico border. I then discuss the phenomenon of Mexican *oraciones* and printed spell cards in general, looking especially at the Mediterranean origin of the erotic domination spells we find in Latin America today. Next, I try to understand the history of the *Oración de la Santísima Muerte*—itself a spell of erotic domination—in colonial Mexico. Finally, I look at Santísima Muerte’s increasingly diversified role in Mexican magic and religion today, with a nod to her growing presence in the United States.

In 1997, in Tucson, Arizona, I bought a small glass bottle containing half an ounce of Santísima Muerte perfume. It cost \$1.50. The Skippy Corporation, based in Detroit and Los Angeles, made the stuff, so the bottle was also labeled in English: “Holy Death.” The liquid in the bottle was bright red. I called the shop lady over to open the locked case and retrieve a bottle for me. What’s it for, I asked. I have no idea, she said. The first bottle in the display was only partly full. She uncapped the bottle behind it, which was also half full, and somewhat recklessly topped off the first bottle. Careful there, I said, don’t spill any. . . . Ehh, she said, tossing the second bottle away, I don’t believe in this stuff. I paid for the bottle, took it home, and opened it to smell the Perfume of Holy Death. It smelled like strawberry candy.

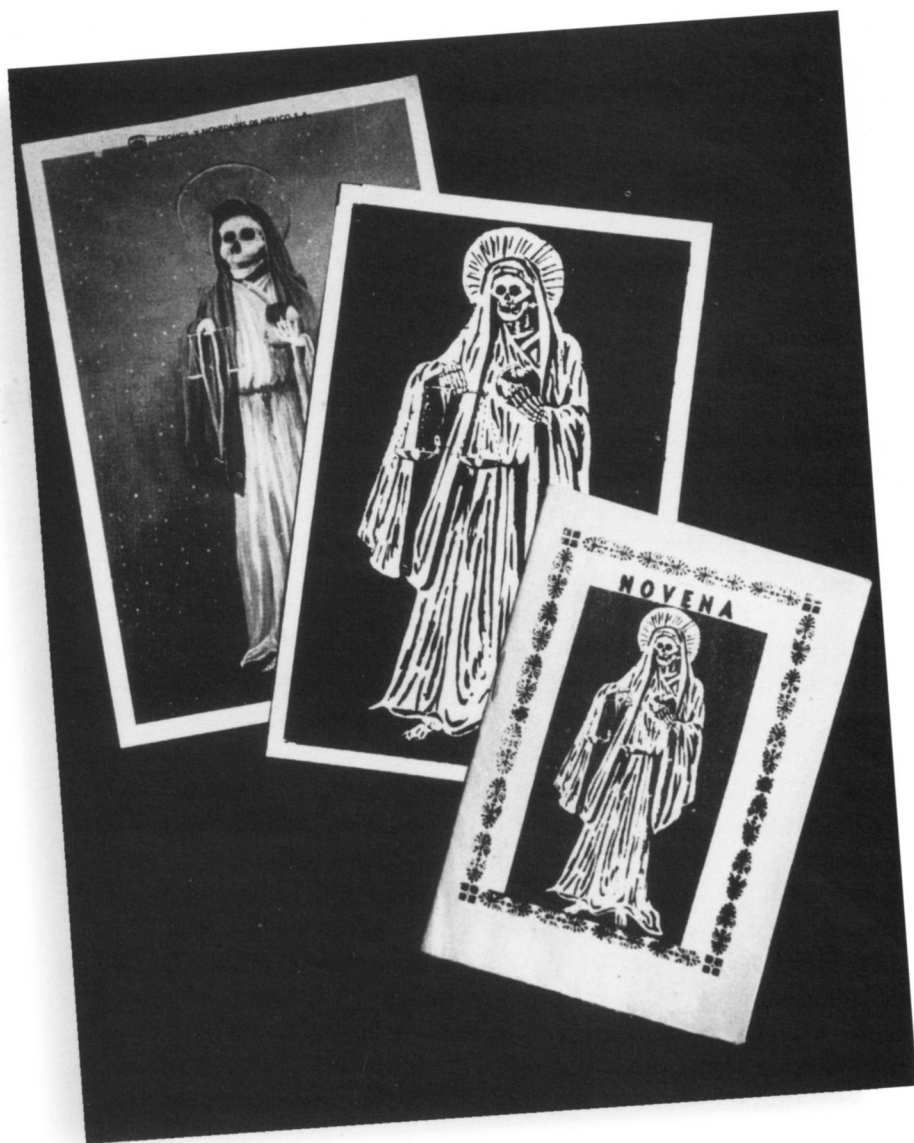
I first met Santísima Muerte in 1992, in Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico, just south of the Arizona border. Pilgrims visit the reclining image of San Francisco Xavier in Magdalena on his feast day in October; non-pilgrims also come to town for the carnival atmosphere. In one of the many religious souvenir stores lining the plaza, I bought a folded piece of paper entitled *Oración de la Sta. Muerte*. I studied the printed image of Santísima Muerte on its cover, the image that I would later come to know so well: a grinning skeleton in a long gown, veiled and haloed, holding the Earth in one hand and a balancing scale in the other.

Unfolding the paper, I found the actual *Oración de la Santa Muerte*. I tried to interpret the prayer; it began by asking Jesus Christ to bring “Fulano,”² tamed and humiliated, to the feet of the supplicant. Next, it invoked Santísima Muerte, Holy Death, for protection. It then asked Death to torment Fulano, so that he never rests and “always thinks of me.”³

Three other prayers were also printed on the folded paper. The *Oración al Espíritu de la Persona* invoked Fulano’s own spirit to bring him, broken and humiliated, back to the supplicant’s feet. The *Oración al Angel de la Guarda* asked Fulano’s Guardian Angel to make him forget “the woman he has” and return to the woman reciting the prayer. Lastly, the *Oración a la Sabila*, or Prayer to the Aloe Plant, asked for good luck, protection, and freedom from evil, seemingly as a kind of antidote to the heavy business of the other three prayers. (I would later see this particular package of prayers, printed together and sold under the Santísima Muerte title, wherever I traveled in Mexico.)

Later, back in Tucson, I found Santísima Muerte’s image at a Hispanic magic supply store called Flores Nacional. In 1994 I found her there on a laminated wallet card, with a shorter version of the *Oración de la Sta. Muerte* on the back. I also found her picture on a small bag of magic powder, with the legend, in English: “to conquer love.” Over the following years I would find other Muerte items at Flores Nacional, including the vial of Skippy brand Santísima Muerte perfume, red Santísima Muerte candles from Chicago, and a canister of Santísima Muerte spiritual incense produced by the Indio Poderoso Company, also of Chicago, with the *Oración de la Santísima Muerte* printed in both Spanish and English.

Eventually, I discovered another Arizona outlet for Santísima Muerte: the Southwest Supermarket chain, widespread in Arizona and currently



expanding into Texas, California, and New Mexico. In June of 1997, I bought a Santísima Muerte candle off the shelf in one of the Southwest Supermarket stores in Tucson. The Muerte candles, displayed alongside the Saint Jude, Niño de Atocha, and Pancho Villa candles, are made by the Reed Candle Company of San Antonio, Texas.⁴ All the

Southwest Supermarkets I've visited in Tucson carry the Muerte candles, and the assistant manager of the St. Mary's Road store assured me that all branches carry pretty much the same inventory. I called a branch in Phoenix to check, and it also carries them.

Interestingly, the popular El Charro restaurant in Tucson buys Santísima Muerte candles at Southwest Supermarkets for resale as curios in the restaurant's gift shop. There they are referred to as "Day of the Dead candles," apparently unaware of the prayer on the back whereby a scorned woman curses her man for leaving her and works a spell of domination to bring him back. (From what I have seen, there is no direct historical connection between Santísima Muerte and the various Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico. As the image of Santísima Muerte becomes more common and accepted, though, it may get some popular use during Day of the Dead.)

In spite of her appearances in the United States, it's still much easier to find Santísima Muerte's image on the Mexican side of the border. In 1994, in the border city of Nogales, Sonora, I bought a Santísima Muerte pendant from a young girl on the street. "What's it for?" I asked. "Protection," she said. More recently, in April of 1997, I went to Nogales, again looking for Santísima Muerte in the magic stores. No problem: the saleslady at Yerbería Medicinales sold me Santísima Muerte soap, Santísima Muerte candles, Santísima Muerte aerosol spray, and a red plastic statue of Santísima Muerte about five inches tall, with magical seeds molded into its base. As I expected, she also carried the Oración de la Santísima Muerte, in the same format I had seen years before in Magdalena.

I asked her what the image was for. "Well," she said, "for love. And for protection from your enemies." Indeed, the candle I bought had "Contra Mis Enemigos" printed under Muerte's image on the front. "Is the image primarily used by women?" I asked. "Both men and women use her," she said, "for both reasons: love and protection." "Is the image relatively new in Nogales?" "No, she's been around a long time." "How long?" "Oh, I don't know . . . many years, a long time." She told me that the magic supplies she stocked—the usual array of candles, powders, liquids, statues, books, printed prayers, and shrink-wrapped amulets on cardboard—mostly came from Mexico City, with a few things coming from Monterrey. "In Mexico City," she said, "people use Santísima Muerte all the time, but here, in Nogales—well, they're a little afraid."

A few blocks farther away from the border, Felix Castro runs the Centrobótica Azteca in a narrow alleyway off the main street. He displays his herbs and magic paraphernalia on a metal shelf bolted to the wall, and the people seeking his assistance rest on a shaded bench during their consultation. He does a good trade in Santísima Muerte items, especially the oración, which he sells as a part of a love magic package, along with a dead hummingbird. He tells me to place the hummingbird—which comes dried, wrapped in red thread, and stapled to a piece of cardboard—next to a photo of the woman (or man, as the case may be) that I desire. Then I am to recite the prayer to Santísima Muerte until my loved one comes to me.⁵

As I traveled farther into Mexico, I would come to realize that Santísima Muerte's presence along the border, well established as it is, pales next to her reign in the center of the country. If, as the owner of the Nogales magic store noted, border inhabitants are still "a little afraid" of Santísima Muerte, they may only be behind the times. But more on that later.

It was a slow weekday afternoon at the Mercado Sonora, the main magic market in Mexico City. I sat with Santiago Bastida on empty crates behind his booth, where he sells religious goods, magic supplies, and sewing notions. Santiago is one-third of Citrun Nueve Santiago, one of the most prolific publishers of oraciones in Mexico, and I was trying to understand how the business works. Between customers, Santiago described, with undisguised glee, the brainstorming sessions during which he and his two associates dream up new oraciones to print. We have some new products coming out, he said: a line of Santería oraciones, another of "Vudú" oraciones, a line dedicated to Satanist figures, and, oh yes, a series of Wiccan spells—prayers to trees, that sort of thing. But Santiago, I said, I didn't think Wicca was established in Mexico. It's not, he exclaimed. We're going to establish it!

The Oración de la Santísima Muerte wasn't the only prayer card I bought in Magdalena, Sonora. I found several other oraciones for sale there as well, of several different varieties: prayers to "official" religious figures (e.g., Santo Niño de Atocha, Santo Niño Ciegoito); to folk saints, historical or legendary (Juan Soldado, Jesus Malverde, Niño Fidencio); to more ephemeral spirits (Santísima Muerte, Tomasito Herrera, Juan Perdido); and to other sources of power, such as the Power-

ful Hand of the Badger (la Mano Poderosa del Tejon), the Master Key (Llave Macstra), and the Miraculous Buddha of Love (Milagroso Buda del Amor).

Later, on several trips to Mexico City from 1995 through 1997, I would collect more than 150 different oraciones from street vendors and the magic booths in the public markets. Santiago Bastida told me that Citrun Nueve Santiago alone has printed more than two hundred different oraciones over the years. (My many attempts to get a list from him have failed; he forgot the list at home, or decided it didn't exist after all, or failed to show up at an appointed time. I suspect either the list doesn't exist or he simply doesn't want me to have it.)

Most Mexican oraciones are printed on a colored cardstock known as *cartulina*, with an image on one side and the prayer on the other. Others are on folded newsprint, like the Santísima Muerte prayer. The prayers themselves generally follow the same form: the invocation of the source of power, the request for a favor, and a final benediction. Ritual instructions may be tacked on the end. Many recommend saying a few Our Fathers. The prayer to the Hand of the Badger—a male prayer for love—instructs the lovelorn fellow to recite the prayer on Tuesdays and Fridays, at midnight, calling out the name of the desired woman three times. Some oraciones call for a specific product—say, “Congo Powder”—conveniently available from the same company that publishes the oración.

The production value of the oraciones varies. The image on the front may be a photo, print, or line drawing. Drawings range from crude sketches to carefully drawn renderings; photos can be clearly reproduced or murky and tantalizingly out of focus. There may be several different styles of the same prayer, with different artwork, either from different publishers or in different editions of the prayer by the same publisher. At one point in 1996, shortages in the usual colored cardstock led to the printing of oraciones on cheap newsprint (*papel revolucionario*, according to Santiago). Within a few months, the shortage had eased and printers were using the colored cardstock again. In 1997, Citrun Nueve started experimenting with a glossy white paper, called *papel canadiense*, striving for a more sophisticated-looking product.

As a collector of oraciones, I always look for the magic booth (or booths) in the public market of Mexican towns. Once there, I linger as inconspicuously as possible, observing the action and the display. Eventually I ask to see the oraciones, and flip through them looking for new

or rare ones. During this search, I often have to step aside so the vendor can retrieve a specific one for a customer. People usually buy a single oración, to address a specific problem. The vendor may suggest a particular one, or one may have been recommended to the buyer by someone else—a friend, perhaps, or a specialist. If buyers need any other materials—candles, herbs, incense, whatever—they can buy them there or at one of the other booths in the market specializing in such paraphernalia.

The oraciones contain pleas for all the things people want: love, luck, health, wealth, power, protection—the list goes on. The number of oraciones in my collection offering domination over the will of others indicates that many people desire such control. It perhaps goes without saying that the spirits invoked to grant domination over others are generally not approved Catholic saints. They are more likely to be the souls of such beings as Juan Minero, Don Diego Duende, Santiago Mulato, Rosita Alvarez, or the Poderoso Monicato. Like Santísima Muerte, these spirits are asked to torment Fulano, to keep him from eating, resting, or sleeping, until he comes crawling, utterly humiliated, to your feet.

Mexicans aren't the only ones using these kinds of oraciones; people in other Latin American countries use them as well. Angelina Pollak-Eltz notes the existence of similar prayer cards in Venezuela, known there as *ensalmes*, and states, "Ensalmes are usually orally transmitted. Today, however, many printed prayers to the saints, to María Lionza, and to spirits can be bought in the 'perfumerías.' Indications are given on how to use them, and what ritual has to accompany them in order to be effective. This is proof of the commercialization of magic rites. Furthermore, the intervention of an 'ensalmista' is no longer necessary, as anybody can use the spell in the prescribed way."⁶

In Colombia, "el número de oraciones y conjuros en los campos y pueblos colombianos, es casi inagotable. En las plazas de mercado venden las oraciones en hojas sueltas y a precios muy elevados, pues consideran que quien tenga la oración debe guardarla en secreto, ya que tiene en su poder un gran tesoro."⁷ Other authors note the use of oraciones in Peru and Argentina.⁸

As is suggested by their use throughout Latin America, the practice of using these magical oraciones originated in Spain. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, the great Mexican anthropologist, states that colonial Spanish women of mixed race ("las mulatas blancas de Cadíz") brought ora-



ciones to Mexico.⁹ Oraciones were widely used in colonial Mexico; Noemí Quezada discusses the role of *ensalmadores*, specialists who used oraciones for healing during the colonial era, in spite of repeated attempts by the Mexican version of the Spanish Inquisition to ban such practices.¹⁰ According to Diana Ceballos Gómez, *ensalmadores* also

played an important role in what is now Colombia; she agrees with the Spanish origin of the practice, and sees in it a possible Arabic origin derived from the curative use of verses of the Koran.¹¹

Fortunately for historians, the Mexican Inquisition kept fairly good records of the activities of the people they punished. In fact, scholars have relied on those records to learn most of what we know about sorcery in colonial Mexico. From them we learn that sorcerers were tried by the Holy Office in Mexico City as early as 1536. In that year, inquisitors tried a Puerto Rican cowherder named Elvira Jiménez for teaching a Mexican widow how to use incantations to procure another husband.¹² (This early example of the Inquisition's work poignantly illustrates the Holy Office's ineffectiveness in quashing love magic. Incantations to get a husband—or keep him, or render him stupid remain among the most common forms of magic used in Mexico today.)

Spanish colonists succeeded in smuggling magical texts into colonial Mexico, in spite of attempts by customs agents to find and confiscate such materials. In 1540, a gentleman named Pedro Ruiz Calderón was tried by the Inquisition for necromancy, the art of divination by contact with the spirits of the dead. Recently arrived in Mexico, Calderón had “publicly announced that he had a command of black magic . . . (and) had an extensive library collected in Europe from which he drew his incantations and spells.”¹³

Many such books of magic spells were circulating throughout Europe at the time. Cirac Estoñapan, in his study of the trials of sorcerers by the Inquisition in Spain, describes a wide selection of prohibited books containing *conjuros*, spells and prayers to various beings. Describing one such book, he states, “En todo el manuscrito, como en las demás obras de este género, anda mezclado el romance con el latín, la letra con los símbolos, lo inmundo con lo santo y el paganismo grosero y bajo con el judaísmo y cristianismo.”¹⁴ Such books, with their spells and procedures, are still in print and available today in Mexico and other Latin American countries, as well as in Tucson. Vendors of magic goods often carry a selection of these manuals, with brightly colored covers and names like *Magia Roja*, *Magia Verde*, *El Libro Infernal*, and *El Libro de San Cipriano*.¹⁵

I have seen the *Libro de San Cipriano*, the Book of Saint Cyprian, perhaps more frequently than the others. This book purports to contain the secret knowledge of Cyprian of Antioch, who later became Saint Cyprian. Cyprian was born sometime in the third century after

Christ and died early in the fourth century, around 304 C.E. A well-educated Mediterranean fellow, Cyprian “studied philosophy at Athens, the occult sciences in Phrygia, the secrets of divination in Chaldea, and the art of casting spells in Egypt.”¹⁶ Cyprian, in fact, specialized in love magic. He was expert in the use of necromantic spells to subjugate the will of married women for adulterous purposes.¹⁷ We are told that Cyprian’s conversion to Christianity resulted from his inability to seduce a particular woman, Justina, who resisted Cyprian’s magical power by invoking the greater power of God. After this failure, Cyprian “burned his magic books, embraced Christianity, and lived ascetically,” eventually becoming a bishop and dying a martyr.¹⁸

As it happens, though, Cyprian’s knowledge of sorcery was not forever lost. The introduction to the *Libro de San Cipriano* informs us that in the year 1001 a monk named Jonas Sufurino lived in the German monastery of Brooken. We are told that Jonas, the librarian of the monastery, spent many years studying the esoteric texts hidden away in the library, until one night he decided to pursue the ultimate knowledge of the dark arts. That night, on a stormy mountaintop, Lucifer himself delivered a copy of Cyprian’s book of spells to Jonas, who in turn released it to the world. Or, at least, so goes the legend.¹⁹

In any event, Cyprian’s legendary spells had a lasting impact on Mediterranean magic. At about the same time as Jonas Sufurino’s revelation on the mountaintop (the eleventh century C.E.), sorcerers in Egypt were using the so-called Spell of Cyprian of Antioch, which like other “binding” spells of the ancient world, was designed to “overpower the mind and body of the victim, the client’s intended lover.” Cyprian’s spell called on the powers that be to “(fill) her from the toenails of her feet to the hair of her head with desire and longing and lust, as her mind is distracted, her senses go numb, and her ears are ringing. She must not eat or drink, slumber or sleep.”²⁰

A few centuries later, erotic domination spells similar to Cyprian’s were common in medieval Spain. In her article on medieval Spanish love magic, María Helena Sánchez Ortega describes wandering sorceresses who were hired by the women of Spain to solve problems of love. These sorceresses used incantations—invocations of spirits—to attract a lover and make him stay. If a man had left a woman, she might also use certain spells to “avenge his neglect.”²¹

As Sánchez Ortega makes clear, women used these spells for survival as much as for romance: “the desired (man’s) presence basically meant



the support of someone who would help the women overcome life's difficulties in a society controlled by men economically as well as religiously. . . . Isolated in society, (the single woman) risked falling into the category of witch. . . . The sorceresses and their clients, therefore, were deeply invested in winning over and retaining the man who . . . could ward off poverty and social marginalization."²²

Sánchez Ortega is talking about medieval Spain, but could just as easily be discussing Mexico—or any number of countries—in the present day. A side-by-side reading of these medieval Spanish oraciones with those of contemporary Mexico drives the point home. Both have the same tone, the same intent, and in some cases even the same wording. The medieval Spanish oraciones described by Sánchez Ortega live again every time a Mexican woman recites oraciones to Santa Barbara, Santa Marta Enamorada, or the Anima Sola to bring back a wandering man.

In fact, the Oración de la Anima Sola, the Lonely Soul of Purgatory, whose existence in medieval Spain is noted by both Sánchez Ortega and Cirac Estoñapan,²³ is one of the more common oraciones in Mexico today. Its disturbing words echo back to Spain, and further, to ancient Mediterranean binding spells: “Anima Sola . . . por las entrañas de la virgen Maria . . . te pido que me metas en el corazón de . . . lo trigas [sic] a mis pies manso y humilde. . . . Si estuviese en casa de otra persona mi voz llegue a sus oídos a perturbarlo, no le dejes tener sosiego ni tranquilidad.”²⁴

And, what Sánchez Ortega calls “the well-known refrain . . . ‘So that he can neither eat nor drink,’ ”²⁵ which we recognize from the Egyptian Spell of Cyprian, still echoes today throughout much of Latin America. It is heard, for instance, when Venezuelan women recite the Oración del Tabaco, using the smoke of a cigar to call the spirits of Santa Marta, Santa Elena, and San Cipriano, along with the peculiarly Venezuelan spirit of María Lionza, “para que me le partas el corazón a fulano, y no me le dejes tranquilidad, ni para comer, ni beber, ni dormir con mujer . . . hasta no venir en donde mí manso y humilde a mis pies.”²⁶ It is heard again in Peru, where the Oración a Santa Elena contains the same language,²⁷ and in Colombia, where Santa Elena is again invoked: “le rezan con vehemencia las mujeres casadas que sufren la ausencia total o parcial del marido.”²⁸

And on the U.S.-Mexico border in Nogales, Sonora, in 1997, I bought the same Oración a Santa Elena, containing the same ancient Mediterranean curse of erotic domination used for centuries by abandoned women. I read the words and wondered: how many other ritual texts of such antiquity remain so alive in the present day?

The cab driver didn't know where we were, so I got out and started hiking the loop roads of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México,

wandering past the strange buildings and monuments rising from a rolling field of black lava on the south side of Mexico City. I had come that day, uninvited and unannounced, to meet Noemí Quezada, the great ethnologist and historian of colonial love magic. At last I found her building, and stated my case at the front desk. Oh no, said the receptionist, the doctora is in conference today and leaves the country tomorrow. As I stood pondering this turn of events, a woman on a pay phone caught my eye and pointed urgently at another woman walking hurriedly past us. It was her.

She was, in fact, leaving the next day for Ecuador, and yes, she had only a few minutes between sessions, but she invited me to tag along and asked me why I had come. I described my search for the origins of *Santísima Muerte*, and my attempts to read the Inquisition documents in the National Archive. I had read her 1974 article, "Oraciones mágicas en la colonia," in which she listed the oraciones mentioned in the Inquisition records, and had noticed that *Santísima Muerte* was not on the list. Was she quite sure that *Santísima Muerte* was not mentioned in the documents? Yes, she said, I'm quite sure. For a few moments, we discussed other possible sources of information, and then she had to go. Is there anything else? she asked. Ah, yes, I stuttered. Could she possibly sign my copy of her latest book?

So who is *Santísima Muerte*? We recognize her prayer ("don't give Fulano a single tranquil moment . . . torment him so he always thinks of me") as a variant on the familiar Mediterranean refrain of love and domination, one of the Greatest Hits of the millennia. But where did the connection with Death, with the skeleton in the robe, come from?

Did it come from Spain? Probably not, at least not directly. While *Santísima Muerte*'s prayer shares certain features with medieval Spanish oraciones, it does not appear in either Sánchez Ortega's or Cirac Estoñapan's discussions. Francisco Rodríguez Marín, in his 1927 study of Spanish oraciones imported to the colonial New World, makes no mention of her.²⁹ And, as Quezada confirmed, *Santísima Muerte* isn't mentioned in the Mexican Inquisition records from the colonial era, while so many other imported Spanish prayers are.³⁰

Furthermore, *Santísima Muerte*, popular to the point of overkill in modern Mexico, is not mentioned in reports from other Latin American countries colonized by Spain. In Venezuela, for example, Pollak-Eltz describes the contents of a typical *perfumería* without mentioning anything like *Santísima Muerte*. It would be virtually impossible to

write a similar description of the magic stores in Mexico without mentioning the figure of *Santísima Muerte*.

We do, however, find a practice similar in the cult of *San la Muerte* in Argentina. This cult revolves around tiny statues of skeletons, usually holding scythes, often carved from human bone. Also known as *Santo Esqueleto* and *Señor de la Muerte*, the image is used for the same purposes as *Santísima Muerte* in Mexico: for protection from enemies, for general success in love, and to avenge neglect by a scornful lover.³¹ The prayers to *San la Muerte* may be orally transmitted,³² handwritten or, less commonly, mechanically printed.³³ They often contain the familiar language of domination, asking that the victim of the spell be made crazy with lust and come crawling in tears to the feet of the supplicant.³⁴

How to explain this parallel? The content of the Argentinian practice certainly seems similar to that of *Santísima Muerte* in Mexico. They both invoke Holy Death and seem to be based on the same Mediterranean ritual texts of domination. But do they reflect a common imported practice of invoking Holy Death, or did two separate populations have the same idea? I don't know. If *Santísima Muerte* were connected geographically with *San la Muerte*—that is, if the practice of invoking Holy Death were spread uniformly across Latin America from Mexico down to Argentina—I would favor the “common Spanish ancestor” theory, especially since the text of the prayer itself is so similar in both. As it is, though, I lean toward the “convergent evolution” idea, where two separate communities both, for whatever reason, decided to assimilate the image of Death with imported Spanish prayers of domination.

So if the Spanish did not bring the prayer of *Santísima Muerte* with them, why did the Mexicans concoct it?

We know that many indigenous groups in pre-Hispanic Mexico had some form of cult of death or of the dead. The exact content and meaning of these cults is not known for sure, but “la persistencia y abundancia de figuras relacionadas con la muerte en los códices nahoas, mixtecos y mayas, los ideogramas formadas con cráneos, costillas y huesos, nos llevan a la conclusión de haber sido sumamente extenso el culto que los indígenas prehispánicos de México guardaron al Señor de los Muertos.”³⁵ Anyone who has visited the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City probably remembers the striking sculpture of Coatlicue, mother of all Nahua gods, the great creator/destroyer, wearing her decorative garland of skulls.³⁶

Of course, the Spanish also brought images of skeletons to Mexico. Carlos Navarrete, in researching the Mexican cult to San Pascualito Rey (a sacred figure of a skeleton in Chiapas), assembled a list of influential Spanish ideas about death which may have affected the development of that particular cult.³⁷ Medieval Europeans developed many frightening images of skeletons as, confronted by plague, they expressed their fear of death and, inspired by Christian theology, they worried about their ultimate salvation. William Schurz notes the tendency of the colonial Spaniards to dwell on death "with morbid insistence."³⁸

So Mexicans had a variety of local and imported ideas and images from which to fashion their beliefs about death. And, if I may generalize, I have observed in Mexico a certain fascination with death and a willingness to look at it head on. As evidence I would mention everything from the frequent use of skeletal imagery in art and popular culture to the stunning photo spreads of accident and murder victims in tabloids and crime magazines. For whatever reason, death is a common motif in Mexico. In the words of Octavio Paz, "Para el habitante de Nueva York, Paris o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio, la frecuente, la burla, la acaricia, duerme con ella, la festeja, es uno de sus juguetes favoritos y su amor más permanente."³⁹

Beyond merely becoming friendly with death, some Mexicans have also chosen to venerate her. I mentioned one example earlier: San Pascualito Rey, the miraculous skeleton image in Chiapas.⁴⁰ I also recently found another sacred skeleton, known simply as Santa Muerte, in the town of Santa Ana, Michoacán. Visitors to the church of Santa Ana worship the small carved skeleton and fill its niche with offerings. Interestingly, Santísima Muerte candles burn by the niche and pendants of Santísima Muerte adorn the image's forehead, wrist, and feet.

So, in my efforts to explain the roots of Santísima Muerte in Mexico, I have no shortage of skeletal imagery to turn to, both in indigenous and colonial culture, both in colonial and modern times. The actual origin of the specific image and prayer of Santísima Muerte, however, remains a mystery.

Serge Gruzinski, in his book *Guerra de las Imágenes*, notes a source describing an image of Santa Muerte in 1797. "Vayamos a las llanuras esteparias del Norte," writes Gruzinski, "a San Luis de la Paz, en 1797. De nuevo, reina el silencio de la noche. Una treintena de indios se encierran en su capilla, beben peyotl, enciendan las velas al revés, ha-



cen bailar a unos muñecos . . . , golpean las cruces con velas de cera; atan con una cuerda mojada una figura de la Santa Muerte y amenazan con azotarla y quemarla si ‘no hace el milagro’ de concederles lo que reclaman.”⁴¹

Another source places the origin of the prayer to Santísima Muerte in the eighteenth century, as part of a campaign to make death less threatening: “Fue en el siglo XVIII cuando se trató de quitarle lo te-

rrorífico para darle el aspecto de amabilidad viéndola sin miedo y con fe, ejemplo de esto es la oración titulada a la Santa Muerte.”⁴²

And, back in the realm of popular legend, a special edition of the Mexican magazine *Mundo Esotérico* recently featured Santísima Muerte on its cover, describing her as one of the “most controversial” images of Mexican magic and telling her story thus: In 1800, in Cordoba, Veracruz, a local sorcerer had a vision of the figure of Death in a dream. When he awoke, he shook off the frightening dream and went to his *consultorio*, that is, his office and consulting room, where he was stunned to find that the same image of Death had appeared on the roof. In fear, he ran to a nearby church and asked the priest to come see the image, but the priest refused, saying the image was proof that the sorcerer had been practicing black magic. Over the next few weeks, the image gradually faded, but the sorcerer began to have prophetic dreams, wherein Death spoke to him. In the final dream Death ordered him to make an image of her and to burn red candles to her, promising all of her devotees a painless death. “Así,” concludes the *Mundo Esotérico* article, “es como dio inicio el culto a esta imagen que ha cautivado a miles de personas.”⁴³

The Oración a la Santísima Muerte shows up in many twentieth-century works on the anthropology of Mexico. In 1947, Frances Toor mentioned it in her *Treasury of Mexican Folkways*, noting the existence of “various (prayers) addressed to Holy Death . . . they beg that the person they want be given no peace until he is at the supplicant’s side.”⁴⁴ Aguirre Beltrán, in his fieldwork in Cuijla in 1948–49, also noted the existence of prayers to Santísima Muerte, and may have been the first to record the current format of the oraciones: “La mayoría de ellas estan impresas en cartones de colores amarillo, rojo y verde, y tienen en el anverso la imagen de un santo y en el reverso la oración.”⁴⁵

Isabel Kelly found the prayer to Santísima Muerte used in love magic in the Laguna area of northern Mexico in the 1950s. Carlos Navarrete collected prayers to Santísima Muerte in Chiapas in the 1960s, and Marcela Olavarrieta, in the 1970s, reports the use of the Santísima Muerte oración for erotic magic in the Tuxtla Mountains, an area of Veracruz famed for sorcery.⁴⁶

María de la Luz Bernal, in her generally anecdotal book *Mitos y magos mexicanos*, describes Santísima Muerte love magic in the 1970s, warning that “los doctos en el conocimiento del sobrenatural han considerado ilícito este tipo de magia, ya que existe el peligro de causar un terrible daño a terceras personas. . . . Todo aquello que se promete a

la muerte, debe cumplirse. Faltar a una promesa es exponer la vida misma.”⁴⁷

She goes on to describe the actual use of the image by groups of women who gather to do their “trabajos negros.” Dressed in black, kneeling before the image of Santísima Muerte with candles in their hands, they sing their “terrible litany”:

Santísima Muerte, tortúralo.
Santísima Muerte, desespéralo.
Santísima Muerte, angústialo.
Santísima Muerte, mortifícalo . . .
(fulano de tal) . . . torturado estás
(fulano de tal) . . . desesperado está.⁴⁸

So, to summarize, the Oración a la Santísima Muerte combines the graphic representation of Death with the ancient erotic spells and invocations of spirits popular in medieval Spain and around the Mediterranean. When the Spanish introduced these spells to the New World, they were received by an indigenous culture already familiar with both love magic⁴⁹ and the graphic representation of Death. Did the Spanish bring the Oración de la Santísima Muerte with them? I don’t think so. I think the oración was invented later, when the potent image of Death was added to a new version of the standard imported ritual text of erotic domination, to achieve an age-old goal: to bring back a wandering man.

But, as we shall see, Santísima Muerte has outgrown her role as a specialist in love magic, to become an all-purpose magical figure, virtually unlimited in her powers.

Judith Rodríguez de Cañal leaned on the counter of her hole-in-the-wall religious print shop in downtown Mexico City and pondered the image of Santísima Muerte. Well, she said, it’s for protection, and for assistance, and for a good death. I remarked on the change I had perceived in Santísima Muerte’s reputation. Oh yes, Judith said. When I was a chamaca (little kid), Santísima Muerte was used for black magic. But now, everyone asks for her! They call her La Niña, or La Niña Blanca. Judith shrugged and smiled wryly, as if to say, What will they think of next?

In 1995, when I first went to the Mercado Sonora in Mexico City, Santísima Muerte was everywhere. Rows of molded plastic statues of her image, from two to sixteen inches high, lined the tables of the mer-

chants. Posters and pendants of her hung on display. I easily bought several different versions of her printed oración. I also found her image for sale at the Basilica de la Virgen de Guadalupe, the main pilgrimage center of Mexico and one of the largest in the world. Every illegal vendor crowding the plaza had a few pendants and medals of Santísima Muerte dangling amidst the Guadalupes. Now, with each succeeding visit to Mexico, I have watched Santísima Muerte become more visible, more prominent, evolving from an expediter of love magic to a all-purpose figure of protection and power.

So is she good or evil? It depends on whom you talk to. By 1997, vendors in the Mercado Sonora were advising me that whether Muerte is good or evil depends on the color of the robe she wears, a new theory which has led to new product lines of Muertes dressed in robes of various colors. Santiago Bastida, the vendor and printer of oraciones, explained that under the new color system each color of Santísima Muerte has a different purpose. A black Muerte continues to be a fearful image, one used for evil works such as killing one's enemies. A red Muerte fulfills the old role of attracting a lover. Green and gold Muertes bring money, and a blue Muerte, he explained, is for "tranquilizing people." "Like who," I asked, bewildered. "Like a violent spouse," he said.

But it is the white Muerte whose influence has grown the most. Far from a figure of evil, the Hermana Blanca—or Niña Blanca or simply La Blanca—is a benevolent spirit offering protection to her devotees. So benign is the white Santísima Muerte that she has become accepted, if perhaps not welcomed, in some Catholic churches. Indeed, as I wandered through the arcade of religious statuary stores behind the National Cathedral in Mexico City, most of which sell a very traditional selection of Catholic statues, I was surprised to see an image of Santísima Muerte on the shelf in one of them. The salesgirl confirmed that it was Santísima Muerte, and yes, it is approved of by the Church, as long as it is the white form, La Blanca. In fact, she said, a local chapel had ordered a statue of La Blanca "this tall," she demonstrated, holding her hand about four feet off the ground. What's La Blanca for? For good luck, the salesgirl said.

One popular magic book, *Brujería a la Mexicana*, is also participating in the attempt to salvage Santísima Muerte's reputation with the Oración a el Dolor de Santísima Muerte. The prayer bemoans the use of Santísima Muerte by the enemies of God, who persuade innocent women to use the image for evil ends: "Oh Santísima Muerte, Usted

que en silencio soporta la pena de ver mancillado su Sacratísimo y Celestial nombre, que los enemigos de Dios utilizan con fines malévolos y perjudiciales, por favor ayude con su Celestial Poder a todas las mujeres que han tenido la desdicha de caer en las garras de los enemigos de Dios.”⁵⁰

Another admirer of Santísima Muerte, a vendor in the Mercado Sonora, explains Santísima Muerte’s good side and her specific ability to assist Mexican women by bringing back family members who have gone to the United States to work:

Tenemos a la Santísima Muerte, que se le adora bastante en los negocios y en las casas. Se le adora porque ella ayuda como una protección, para que nos protejamos de las envidias, de la maldad, de la mala voluntad que nos rodea.

Nosotros le llamamos la Hermana Blanca, no se le ve con temor, sino con adoración, porque hace muchos milagros, sobre todo cuando queremos que vuelva una persona ausente, por ejemplo, un hijo. Tenemos hijos que se van a ganar un centavo fuera de la ciudad de México, que se van de braceros a los Estados Unidos. Ese problema lo vemos casi a diario. Cuando no se va el hijo, se va la esposa, se va la hija o se va la hermana, qué sé yo. Para que regrese, por medio de oraciones se invoca al espíritu de la Santísima Muerte y al espíritu de “fulano de tal,” el que se fue, y luego se regresa.⁵¹

Still, in spite of this recent movement to accentuate Santísima Muerte’s positive works, she remains a dualistic force, capable of great evil, to the extent that some recommend not messing with her at all. Claudio V. de la Cruz, in his *Recetario de magia blanca* (Recipe Book of White Magic), offers the following warning: “Vela de la Santa Muerte: Por favor nunca use esta vela ya que solo le acarreará muy malos ratos a su vida y un karma que muy difícilmente podrá borrar en esta vida.”⁵²

If you do decide to invoke Santísima Muerte, you must be prepared, according to María Teresa Sepulveda, who describes the prayer to Santísima Muerte, along with other common prayers of domination, and says: “Muchas de estas oraciones se consideran ‘malas’ porque en ellas se invoca el diablo y a los espíritus infernales; antes de emplearlas, el usuario debe de estar ‘preparado’ corporal y anímicamente, es decir, debe guardar abstinencia sexual y estar decidido a entregar su alma a los seres invocados, a cambio del deseo solicitado.”⁵³

Certainly, some Mexicans have put Santísima Muerte to some unseemly uses. Adolfo Constanzo, the leader of the band of “narcosatánicos” who committed the famous Matamoros drug murders of the late 1980s, apparently found her useful. Edward Humes, in his book on the episode, exhibits some photos of the paraphernalia collected from Constanzo’s ranch. There, among the skulls, saints, dolls, and daggers, sits a statue of Santísima Muerte.⁵⁴

In his book *Beliefs and Holy Places*, Jim Griffith notes the presence of Santísima Muerte and other domination prayers in Sonora: “Suspecting that these printed cards might relate to another recent arrival on the border—the drug trade—I sent copies of them to Arturo Carrillo Strong.” Strong contacted one of his connections in the drug trade, who recognized the prayers and confirmed that “men involved in the drug trade know better than to ask God, the Virgin, and the saints for help. . . . They turn, rather, to the devil, who looks more favorably on that sort of activity.”⁵⁵



So we see that Santísima Muerte is a multifaceted image, an image that changes to meet the needs of whomever is using it at the time. Interestingly, some vendors in the Mercado Sonora have recently initiated Santísima Muerte into Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion making strong inroads in Mexico and the United States. Followers of this religion commonly identify certain Catholic saints with the *orisha*, deities of the Santería pantheon, and several of the Mercado Sonora vendors who sell the paraphernalia of Santería rituals told me they identify Santísima Muerte with Oyá, the *orisha* who is “dueña de la puerta del cementerio y diosa de las tempestades. . . . Además es la que domina a los muertos.”⁵⁶

Followers of a Mexican spiritualist religion known as Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano have also incorporated Santísima Muerte—the white form—into their pantheon, as La Hermana Blanca. Silvia Ortiz Echániz participated in a pilgrimage to one of this church’s sacred sites near Mexico City, where the mediums of the church channeled various healing spirits. Santísima Muerte made her appearance to complain about the blasphemies she has been subjected to, and to express her plan to reclaim her God-given role as the purveyor of ultimate justice to all.⁵⁷

As mentioned previously, the image of Santísima Muerte has also become attached to the cult of Santa Muerte in Santa Ana, Michoacán. In this case, one suspects that the priest, who has already made accommodations for the worship of Santa Muerte, is less than pleased to see the image of Santísima Muerte—so long considered an icon of black magic—dangling from the statue in the church.

In sum, I believe I have witnessed growth and change in the devotion to Santísima Muerte, a devotion whose epicenter is Mexico City but whose influence reaches north to the border of the United States and across that border via emigration and commerce. This kind of movement takes time, and changes in the center—such as the recent invention of the kinder, gentler Hermana Blanca—are not immediately apparent in the outlying areas. Certainly, I have seen nothing like the Hermana Blanca in Nogales, where Santísima Muerte is still a rather dark, intimidating figure of love magic and domination.

As we have seen, though, Santísima Muerte is a flexible image. Invoked by abandoned wives, she brings ancient Mediterranean love magic into modern times. Invoked by criminals, she offers protection and power over one’s enemies. Invoked by merchants, she brings monetary success. Invoked by battered wives, she pacifies angry husbands. Invoked by mothers of sons gone away, she brings them home. Invoked

by Mexican followers of Santería, she merges with the Afro-Cuban goddess Oyá. Invoked by Catholics as La Hermana Blanca, she offers church-sanctioned (at least in some instances) luck and protection.

And now, as she establishes her unearthly presence in the United States, where the recently-immigrated or the simply curious can lift her from the supermarket shelf and experiment with her power, what will her role be?

Only time will tell. ✦

APPENDIX: ORACIÓN DE LA STA. MUERTE

Text of the prayer, as it commonly appears in the printed oración:

Jesucristo vencedor, que en la Cruz fuiste vencido, vence a “fulano de tal,” que esté vencido conmigo en nombre del Señor si eres animal feroz manso como un cordero, manso como la flor de romero; tienes que venir; pan comíste, de él me diste y por la palabra [sic] mas fuerte que me diste, quiero que me traigas a “fulano de tal,” que esté humillado, rendido a mis plantas a cumplir lo que me ha ofrecido. Santísima Muerte, yo te suplico encarecidamente que así como te formó Dios inmortal con tu grande poder sobre todos los mortales hasta ponerlos en la esfera celeste donde gozaremos un glorioso día sin noche para toda la eternidad y en el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo yo te ruego y te suplico te dignes ser mi protectora y me concedas todos los favores que yo te pido hasta el último día, hora y momento en que su Divina Majestad ordene llevarme ante su presencia, Amén.

JACULATORIA:

Muerte querida de mi corazón no me desampares con tu protección y no me dejes a “Fulano de Tal” un solo momento tranquilo; moléstalo a cada momento, mortifícalo e inquiétalo para que siempre piense en mí.

Se rezan tres Padres Nuestros.

My rough translation, following the original punctuation, is as follows:

Jesus Christ the Conqueror, who on the cross was conquered, conquer Fulano so that he may be conquered here with me in the name of the Lord if you are a ferocious animal meek as a lamb, meek as the flower of the rosemary; you have to come; bread you ate and of it you gave to me, and by the strongest word which you gave to me, I want you to bring me Fulano; may he be humiliated, subdued at my feet to complete what he has promised me. Most Holy Death, I beseech you affectionately that as Immortal God formed you with your great power over all mortals even placing them in the celestial sphere where we enjoy a glorious day without night for all of eternity and in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost I beg and plead for you to deign to be my protector and grant me the wishes I ask up to the last day, hour and moment in which your Divine Majesty orders me brought before your presence, Amen.

JACULATORIA (Short fervent prayer)

Death beloved of my heart don't leave me without your protection and don't give Fulano a single tranquil moment; disturb him at every moment, mortify and torment him so he always thinks of me.

Pray three Our Fathers.

The container of Holy Death Spiritual Incense that I bought in Tucson, made by the Indio Poderoso firm of Chicago, translates the prayer as follows:

PRAYER TO THE HOLY DEATH

Oh! Conquering Jesus Christ, that in the cross were defeated, like you would tame a ferocious animal, tame the soul of (name). Tame as a lamb and tame as a rosemary flower he shall come to kneel before me and obey my every command. Holy Death, I plea of your immortal powers that God has given you towards mortals, place us in a celestial sphere where we'll enjoy days without nights for all eternity. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I plea for your protection. Grant all our wishes until the last day, hour and moment that your Divine Majesty orders us to appear before You. Amen.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all conversations occurred in Spanish. All translations of conversations and written texts are my own.

2. "Fulano" and "fulano de tal," the equivalent of "so-and-so," or "fill in the blank," appear frequently in Mexican oraciones. "Fulana" is the female version.

3. Oración de la Sta. Muerte, no date. The complete text of the Oración de la Sta. Muerte, along with translations, is included as an appendix.

4. The prayer on the back of the candle is the usual one, but the image is slightly different. Instead of a globe and scale, the robed skeleton carries a skull in her left hand and holds her right hand up, palm forward, in an enigmatic gesture. A similar image appears on the container of Santísima Muerte spiritual incense produced by the Indio Poderoso Company of Chicago. Where did this different U.S. version come from?

5. Quezada (1975) describes the magical use of the hummingbird (*chuparrosa*) in love magic by the Aztecs, a practice readily absorbed into colonial life and still very much alive today. The Oración de la Chuparrosa is one of the more common printed oraciones, a lovely combination of Aztec and Spanish magical practices.

6. Pollak-Eltz 1982: 192.

7. Ocampo López 1989: 247. Translation: "The number of oraciones and spells in the cities and countryside is nearly inexhaustible. Single-sheet oraciones are sold in the marketplaces, at very elevated prices, and it is believed that whoever owns an oración should guard it carefully, since they have a great treasure in their possession."

8. See Frisancho Pineda (1986) for examples in Peru and Coluccio (1986) for Argentina. See also Taussig (1997) for interesting examples from Venezuela.

9. Aguirre Beltrán 1958: 200.

10. Quezada 1989: 101.

11. Ceballos Gómez 1994: 74.

12. Greenleaf 1962: 112.

13. Greenleaf 1962: 118.

14. Cirac Estoñapan 1942: 33–34. Translation: "Throughout this manuscript, as in the other works of this type, romance and Latin languages are mixed, as are letters and symbols, the impure with the holy, and base paganism with Judaism and Christianity."

15. Ocampo López (1989: 248) states that "Las fuentes originarias de las oraciones son antiguos libros de magia que circularon profusamente en Europa hasta mediados del siglo XIX y que hoy son editados popularmente en casi todos los países americanos." Translation: "The original sources of these prayers are ancient books of magic which circulated widely in Europe until the mid-nineteenth century, and which are published today for a popular audience in most American countries."

See also Taussig (1987) for a discussion of the role of these magic books in colonial Colombia. The photo of a Putumayo herbalist's stall on p. 271, re-

markably similar to a typical Mexican herbalist's stall, shows several of these magic books for sale, including the *Libro de San Cipriano*.

16. Englebert 1994: 366.
17. Flint 1991: 233–34.
18. Englebert 1994: 366.
19. *Libro de San Cipriano, tesoro del hechicero*, n.d.: pp. 8–9.
20. Meyer and Smith 1994: 148.
21. Sánchez Ortega 1991: 61.
22. Sánchez Ortega 1991: 61.
23. Cirac Estoñapan 1942: 133.
24. Oración del Anima Sola spell card, n.d. Translation: “Anima Sola . . . by the entrails of the Virgin Mary, I ask that you insert me into the heart of (fill in the blank), and bring him to my feet, meek and humble. . . . If he’s in the home of another, let my voice reach his ears and disturb him, let him have no peace or tranquility.”
25. Sánchez Ortega 1991: 74.
26. Pollak-Eltz 1972: 113–14. Translation: “rend the heart of Fulano, and give him no peace, neither to eat nor drink nor sleep with a woman . . . until he comes to me, meek and humble, to my feet.” This prayer is another nice example of the melding of native practices (divination with tobacco) with imported ones.
27. Frisancho Pineda 1986: 36.
28. Ocampo López 1989: 215. “Married women suffering from the partial or total absence of their husband pray to her with vehemence.”
29. Rodríguez Marín 1927.
30. Quezada 1974.
31. París 1988: 65–71.
32. París 1988: 67.
33. Coluccio 1983: 391.
34. Coluccio 1983: 395.
35. Mendoza 194: 91. Translation: “the persistence and abundance of figures related to death in the Nahua, Mixtec, and Maya codices, the ideograms formed of skulls, ribs, and bones, lead us to the conclusion that the pre-Hispanic indigenous cult to the Lord of the Dead must have been quite extensive.”
36. Adela Fernández (1983: 109) conflates Coatlicue with “Tonatzin (our venerated mother)” who later, of course, transmogrified into the Virgin of Guadalupe, whom I choose to view as Santísima Muerte’s nicer, fleshier sister goddess.
37. Navarrete 1982: pull-out timeline.
38. Schurz 1964: 83.
39. Octavio Paz in Navarrete 1982: 11. Translation: “For the inhabitant of New York, Paris, or London, ‘death’ is the word never spoken because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, spends time with it, makes fun of it, caresses it, sleeps with it, throws parties for it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most abiding love.”

40. Navarrete 1982.

41. Gruzinski 1995: 192. Translation: "Let us go to the steppe-like plains of the North, to San Luis de la Paz, in 1797. The silence of night reigns once again. Thirty Indians are enclosed in their chapel, drinking peyote, lighting candles backwards, making little dolls dance . . . , they strike at crucifixes with wax candles; they tie up a figure of Santa Muerte with wet cord and threaten it with lashings if it doesn't 'perform the miracle' of granting them what they demand."

42. Reyes 1989: 22–23. Translation: "It was in the eighteenth century that the attempt was made to make [death] less terrifying, to give it the appearance of kindness, to be seen without fear but with faith, an example of this effort being the prayer dedicated to Santa Muerte."

43. *Mundo Esotérico* 1997 (10): 5. Translation: "Thus began the cult to this image, which has captivated thousands of people."

44. Toor 1947: 144.

45. Aguirre Beltrán 1958: 233. Translation: "Most of them are printed on yellow, red, and green cardstock. They carry the image of a saint on one side and a prayer on the other."

46. Kelly 1965: 107; Navarrete 1968: 52; Olavarrieta 197: 116.

47. Bernal 1982: 25. Translation: "The experts in the knowledge of the supernatural have considered this type of magic illicit, since one can cause terrible harm to third parties. . . . Whoever makes a promise to Death must not fail to keep it, for to do so is to risk life itself."

48. Bernal 1982: 27. Translation: "Most Holy Death, torture him. Most Holy Death, make him desperate. Most Holy Death, fill him with anguish. Most Holy Death, mortify him . . . Fulano, tortured you are. . . . Fulano, desperate you are."

49. See Quezada (1975) for examples of pre-Hispanic love magic.

50. Escobedo Cordero 1994: 166. Translation: "Oh, Most Holy Death, you who in silence bear the shame of seeing your Most Sacred and Celestial name stained, which the enemies of God use toward malevolent and harmful ends, please use your Celestial Power to help all of the women who have had the misfortune of falling into the claws of these enemies of God."

51. Sánchez Loeza 1994: 136. Translation: "We have Santísima Muerte, who is much adored in businesses and houses. She is adored because she serves as a protection, so we are protected from envy, evil, and the bad will that surrounds us.

"We call her the 'White Sister,' we don't regard her with fear but with adoration, because she has performed many miracles, above all when we want an absent person to return, for example, a son. We have sons who go to earn a penny outside of Mexico City, who go as laborers to the United States. We see this problem almost daily. If it's not the son who's gone, it's the wife, or a daughter or sister, whatever. To make them return, we use prayers to invoke the spirit of Santísima Muerte and the spirit of *fulano de tal*, the one who left, and then they return."

52. De la Cruz n.d.: 67. Translation: "Candle of Holy Death: Please never use this candle, as only bad results will occur in your life, and you will incur karma that will be very difficult to erase in this lifetime."

53. Sepulveda 1983: 178. Translation: "Many of these prayers are considered 'bad' because they invoke the devil and the infernal spirits; before using them, the user must be 'prepared,' physically and spiritually; that is, she should maintain sexual abstinence and be ready to deliver her soul to the invoked spirits, in exchange for the favor requested."

54. Humes 1991: plates.

55. Griffith 1992: 65.

56. Editorial Panapo 1990: 60. Translation: "guardian of the door to the cemetery and the goddess of storms. . . . Also she who dominates the dead."

57. Ortiz Echániz, Silvia, in Navarro and Storm 1994: 222–23.

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